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Chapter VII

The Wedding

§ 1. DESCRIPTION

The NORTHWESTERN CAUCASIANS. The finest descriptions of the Abkhazian wedding, to my mind, are those of Deržavin and Seidlitz.[1] Unless indicated, our data have been taken from the latter author.

On the appointed day the bridegroom and his attendants hasten to the home of the bride, and after having extended them a hearty welcome, her father solemnly hands her over to the groom. A procession is formed, which then proceeds towards the bride's new home. The Abkhazian bridal song, "Bedniera" ("Happiness"), and continuous pistol salutes fill the air as the horsemen suddenly break into a wild gallop and begin their famous Caucasian *dzhigirt* (riding stunts).

As soon as the wedding procession nears the groom's house, one of the riders gallops ahead. A pistol salute lets all know that the bride is near.

As soon as she reaches the house, an immense round loaf of millet bread is tossed over her head three times, then broken, and eaten by all present.

A bridal arch is formed at the doorway of the house by two men with crossed swords. On the threshold she is given some sugar and honey with the words "May God grant you a tongue as sweet as sugar and honey."[2]

She then crosses the threshold and receives a dish of *ghomi* (millet) and an egg. What the significance of this ceremony may be we are not told. She is then led thrice round the hearth, scattering grains of millet in all directions.

The bride then sits down and a little boy is brought to her. She takes him on her lap, in order that she too may, before long, have the happiness of becoming the mother of a boy.[3]

After this ceremony she is taken to the *amhara* (little house or hut).

On the following day visitors arrive to become acquainted with the bride[4] and to offer her various gifts. An attendant is always at her side to introduce the guests as they come. The veil is lifted from her face as she stands before the visitor motionless, with downcast eyes, and not uttering a single word. If

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[1] N. C. Deržavin, "Iz oblasti kavkazskoj etnografii. Svad'ba v Abchazii," SMOMPK, XXXVI (1906), No. 2, pp. 1—10. N. von Seidlitz, "Die Abchasen," *Globus*, LXVI (1894), No. 3, pp. 40 f. See also Dubrovin's description, *Istorija*, I, ii, pp. 49 ff.

[2] It is most likely the mother of the household who invites the bride to cross the threshold, a custom found also among other peoples of North Caucasus.

[3] Cf. *infra*, p. 205.

[4] Deržavin, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

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the guests have any questions, it is her girl-companion that must answer. The bride may at the most nod in affirmation.

She remains in her "hermitage" for some months before she is finally permitted to live with the rest of the household.[5]

The following description is chiefly that of the main Cherkess tribe, the Kabardians.

The *kalym* has been paid and the day of the wedding agreed upon. The relatives of the bridegroom begin the necessary wedding preparations. The odour of steaming beer and of the finest dainties creates a distinctive atmosphere, peculiar to a Kabardian wedding. On the eve of the marriage a group of men gallop through the *aul* inviting relatives to a preparatory feast, on the occasion of which a collection is taken to cover some of the expenses of the coming wedding, e. g., purchase of a veil for the bride, chartering of a bridal wagon.

On the following day young men fully-armed gather at the house of the groom and noisely gallop off to the bride's house. The bridegroom, however, does not go with them but "hides" at his best-man's house.[6] By doing so he becomes temporarily an adopted son *(kan)* of the latter's sib. A young companion called *shatso-kot* must always be at his side to protect him.

When the riders (or to be more exact, the bridal procession) reach the bride's house, her attendant, whom the riders brought along, is taken to the women's quarters, while the rest, after having feasted and danced till late into the night, are given lodging either in the house of the bride or of one of the neighbours.

Immediately after breakfast on the following day, the unusual hustle peculiar to a Cherkess wedding is observed outside the bride's house. The horses are being harnessed, the bride's belongings are being packed carefully but hurriedly into a trunk and put on the specially decorated bridal wagon. The bride herself is inside the house, being attired in her finest clothes. From her hair hangs a long white ribbon reaching to the ground. She is veiled, or rather, wrapped in a large white shawl. Her wedding dress differs but slightly from the ordinary Cherkess dress, except that it is made of more costly material. She is assisted on to the wagon and takes her place next to her ever-faithful girl-attendant. As soon as the bridal procession begins to move, the young men of the *aul*, all on horseback, try to snatch the caps away from the guests and thus begin the usual bridal horseraces. When the more "dignified" part of the procession enters the village of the groom, a wedding song is sung. By this time the racers have rested a bit and are ready to break into another wild chase. They again snatch one another's caps, throwing them on the ground, and as the rider gallops past one of the caps, he tries his skill at shooting a hole through it.

The bride is then taken by two women into the women's quarters, whilst outside the cracks of pistols and guns continue. The bride slowly sits down on a specially prepared bench, covered with a carpet. All eyes are fixed on her as a girl-friend of hers has the honour of removing the shawl.

While the riders outside are enjoying their beer, the youth of the village armed with long poles occupy a place difficult for the horsemen to pass. The

[5] Seidlitz, *op. cit.*, pp. 40 f; Deržavin, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
[6] C. Hahn, *Kaukasische Reisen und Studien*, p. 40.

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riders charge wildly, slashing their whips in all directions against their attackers whose task it is to prevent the horsemen form entering the house. The battle continues till the riders finally manage to jump over the fence or to break it down and thus force their way into the house. The " defenders of the bride " throw away their poles and begin dancing with the girls of the village. At noon they all enter the house to congratulate the parents of the groom. Dances commence again and last until midnight.

All this time, as we have already mentioned, the groom is absent, temporarily adopted by a neighbouring sib and guarded day and night by his *shatso-kot*. When the groom retires, the *shatso-kot* must spend the night in the yard protecting the bridegroom against any intruder. Never may he abandon his post. During the day it is his strict obligation to entertain the groom and this he usually does by horseback riding, away from the village. In the evening the two are joined by other companions. Toward midnight all leave except of course the *shatso-kot*, who must now accompany the groom to his bride.[7]

The first three nights, as a part of the wedding ceremony, the groom must undo the bride's stays.[8] Her corset is a broad red leather belt, which is sewed tightly about her waist and is never removed till the wedding night. According to Pallas, the corset was donned when she was 10 or 12 years old,[9] while other explorers claim that the corset was sewed on soon after the bride was born.[10] In any case, she may never take the corset off : it must remain untouched till it bursts and then it must immediately be replaced by another. The husband alone has the right to undo it, on the wedding night. The corset renders the waist very small in proportion to the shoulders, the purpose being to prevent the growth of the breasts, an essential requirement for Cherkess beauty.[11] In some places at least, the custom of wearing such stays has been recently discarded.[12]

Pallas and Ellis in their reports dating from the 18th century claim that the corset is " cut with a dagger, a custom sometimes productive of very fatal accidents."[13] Today untieing and not cutting the stays is the orthodox ceremony with the Cherkess[14] and the Ossetes. To cut them would subject the groom to endless ridicule.[15] Since the custom of *cutting* was " productive of very fatal accidents " we can easily understand why the pratice has been given up. Sometimes the bride's girl-friends maliciously tie a large number of very difficult knots, so that the temptation to make use of the dagger is not slight. On the first three nights the bride is not allowed to say a word to her husband.[16]

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[7] Hahn, *op. cit.*, pp. 40—44. For a description of a wedding among the Temirgoi see Vasil'kov, *op. cit.*, pp. 89—101.

[8] Ladyženskij, FT, p. 191.

[9] P. S. Pallas, *Bemerkungen auf einer Reise in die südl. Statth. des russ. Reichs etc.*, I, pp. 380 f.

[10] Ellis, *Memoir of a map etc.*, p. 24.

[11] Pallas, *l. c.*; Ellis, *l. c.*; Dubrovin, *Istorija*, I, i, p. 127. Prof. D. Wölfel has called my attention to a similar practice in Tyrol.

[12] For example, Ladyženskij could not find the practice in Kamenomostki Aul in 1927, FT, p. 191.

[13] Pallas, *op. cit.*, I, p. 381 ; Ellis, *l. c.*

[14] C. Hahn, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[15] Baddeley, *op. cit.*, I, p. 270.

[16] Hahn, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

585 however, we must make allowance for tribal differences. The Ingush wedding has been described especially well by Jakovlev.[25]

There is excitement in the village,[26] and the whole atmosphere is festive. Before one of the Ingush houses a crowd is gathering, the riders towering above all. There is reason for this excitement and festivity, for a son is being married. Inside the house, too, there is excitement—but perhaps we should call it [273] "activity" instead. A sheep is being slaughtered, *braga* is being brewed, cakes are being baked. But in spite of all this hustle, there seems to be time and reason enough to interrupt all work—just for a moment—the butcher, the brewer, the baker, one and all, go to the door and gaze a moment at the crowd as it begins to form into a semi-orderly wedding procession. At the head we see the proud father of the groom, and behind him his male relatives and some girls. Even billy-goats and rams are there (gifts for the bride's family)—all are there except the groom. He and one of his comrades disappeared several days ago and have not been heard of since. (The bride vanished from her home too, but by now she has most likely returned.) The bridegroom is no doubt "hiding" with a neighbour. The whole village is excited—everybody, we are told, except the groom, for etiquette demands that he act as unconcerned as if marriage were an everyday affair.

Men on horseback, men, women, and noisy children on creaky carts or on foot, wend their way down the dusty village road. When they reach the bride's house her father dashes out in front of the procession and with beaming face [534] welcomes all heartily. The *pandir* (a native three-stringed instrument) begins a joyful wedding tune and all join in the customary marriage songs. Formerly the girls would form into two contending choirs, the friends of the groom against [522] the friends of the bride, alternately singing songs and trying to out-ridicule the other,[27] a veritable battle of tongues and voices.

Singing, dancing, and feasting, continue till evening, when the procession [526] is formed again (but this time not without the bride). The horsemen now gallop off and begin their wild, dangerous wedding races.[28]

As soon as the procession reaches the groom's house, the bride enters the *saklia* and receives some honey and butter, coyly listening to the words "Be thou ever soft as butter and ever sweet as honey."

After this little ceremony she is led behind a curtain where she must remain for the next few days, entertained only by a number of girl-companions.

The formal marriage contract takes place according to the simple Islamic rite. The mullah, as usual, presides, while the parents of the bride and groom make the contract.

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[25] Jakovlev, *Ingushi*, pp. 52—56.
See also Dubrovin's description, *Istorija*, I, i, pp. 430—435.

[26] A year or two may elapse after the betrothal, the time of marriage depending mainly on how soon the *kalym* can be paid. Cf. Berže, *Čečnja i Čečency*, p. 98.

[27] For texts of wedding songs see Jakovlev, *l. c.*

[28] Grabovskij, "Ekonomičeskij i domašnij byt, etc.," p. 21. Horseraces play an important part in funerals throughout the Caucasus. See R. Bleichsteiner, "Rossweihe und Pferderennen im Totenkult der kaukasischen Völker," *Wiener Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte und Linguistik*, Salzburg-Leipzig, 1936, pp. 414—495.

TABLE 16

Marriage Ceremonies of N. Caucasians And Neighbours

Marriage Ceremonies	Procession			Dramatization of capture	Horse-racing	Both sibs (families) present	Groom absent for large part of wedding	Segregation of bride during wedding	Bride's submission to husband	Wedding elaborate, expensive with much feasting & dancing	Mother-in-law †			Corset ceremony	Proof of Virginity	Child placed on bride's lap	Special wishes for boys	Fire-place ceremony	Gifts to bride from own sib	"Tramping on bed" ceremony	Sword placed over bride's head	Special attendant for groom	Special attendant for bride	Mother plays important rôle	Maternal uncle important rôle	Formal religious contract	Reconciliation ceremony	Predominant Character of Ceremonies
	From groom's house to bride	Return with bride to groom's house	Groom is absent								Invites bride to cross threshold	Offers bride some honey	Bride's submission to														
Abkhaz	+	+	–		+	+		+		+	+	+		+		+	+	+	+	–	+		+	–	–	+		Pastoral
Cherkess	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	–	+	+	+	–	–	+	+	Pastoral
Ingushi	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+		+			?	+	+	+	+	–		+	+	–	–	+		Pastoral
Other Chechens	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		+		+				+	+	?	+	–		+	+	–	–	+		Pastoral
Avars	+	+	+	+		+	+		+	+	+	+	+		+	·		?	+	+		+	+	+	–	+		Pastoral + Agrarian
Dargwa	+	+	+	+		+	+		+	+	+	+	+		+	—		?	+	+		+	+	+	–	+		Pastoral + Agrarian
Other Lesghians	+	+	+	+		+	+		+	+	+	+	+		+	—		—	+	+		+	+	+	–	+		Pastoral + Agrarian
Khevsurs	+	+		+		+									+			+		–				+	–	+		Pastoral + Agrarian
Pshavs *	+	+	–			+				+	+	+			+		+	+	+	–		+	+	+	–	+		Pastoral + Agrarian
Tushi												+													+	+		
Ingiloi	+	+													+									+	–			
Ossetes	+	+		+		+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+		+	+	+	+	–	+	+	+	–	–	+		Pastoral
Karachai				+																								

* Cf. Makalatija. "Iz starogo narodnogo byta Pšavov," SE, 1938, No. 1, pp. 105.

† It is usually the mother-in-law.

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